

Delta problems should be of vital concern to all Californians

Over the next few months, Californians will be asked to decide how to use the state's water. In so doing, they will decide the future course of California.

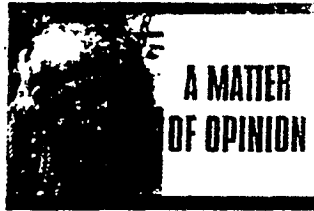
The centerpiece of that decision is the Sacramento-San Joaquin Bay-Delta system, fed by the Sierra snowpack flowing through the rivers and streams of the Central Valley to the confluence of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers, and then west to San Francisco Bay. It is the most important estuary on the west coast of North and South America.

The Delta, a series of channels and tributaries between San Francisco and Sacramento, supports a vast array of plants and wildlife. It is nursery habitat and a migratory pathway for important species of fish, including the last great run of chinook salmon in the lower 48 states. In addition to providing for the salmon fishery off this state and Oregon and the coastal communities that the industry supports, large-scale water diversions from the Delta — sometimes more than half of its flow — go to irrigate many of the crops contributing to the state's multi-billion dollar agricultural sector. It also supplies water to arid Southern California and some urban districts in the north.

Here in Northern California we have done a good job in recent years of voicing concern about our water and our environment — from soundly defeating a proposed canal around the Delta to take even more water, to the recent passage of a billion dollar bond act aimed at fixing many of the problems resulting from water development. It is now time to put that same focus on the Bay-Delta.

As a result of a decades-long struggle among various competing interests and projected future demands for even more water to be diverted from the Delta or its tributaries, the system is on the brink of failure. There are at least five major problems facing the system:

Environment. The Delta constitutes a vast ecosystem that supports diverse and many unique species, whose protection is important to the environmental quality of this state. Unfortunately, because of the past uses placed on the Delta and



Pietro Parravano

demands for its water, many of these species of plants and animals are now listed as threatened or endangered, and could become extinct — lost forever to future generations of Californians — unless something is done now to protect the Delta and its habitat.

Fisheries. The Delta supports habitat and a migratory path for native populations of chinook salmon, steelhead trout and sturgeon, as well as striped bass and shad. Environmental conditions in the Delta, due to floods or significant diversions and other causes, are often hostile for these fish. Indeed, it has become necessary over the past 20 years to truck much of fall-run chinook from hatcheries around the Delta for release into the Bay to sustain ample numbers of this population. But trucking doesn't work for natural spawning stocks and species, such as the Sacramento winter-run chinook, steelhead and Delta smelt, all of which are now listed as threatened or endangered. Unless something is done to correct the problems in the Delta, many of these fish, which sustained native Americans and later the early California settlers and miners, could be lost forever. If the salmon stocks are severely impacted, the coastal communities from Santa Barbara to Astoria that depend on the fish would be economically devastated.

Water quality. Land uses throughout the watershed have also contributed to an overall decline in water quality. As more and more water is taken from the system, the concentrations of certain compounds in the water rise. This has a negative impact on fish and wildlife, drives up water treatment costs for downstream users who depend on the system for their water supply and can negatively impact agriculture and fisheries.

Water supply. The quantity and reliability of water supplies

for much of the state is also affected. If Delta problems are not fixed, habitat, wildlife and fisheries, and out-of-stream water users also could be disrupted. More importantly, if curbs are not placed on new demands for Delta water, the reliability of water supplies for existing Delta water uses — from the environment to agricultural, current municipal uses to fisheries — is threatened.

System failure. Some of the levees in the Delta, which protect local communities, farms and infrastructure, are vulnerable to failure from flooding and earthquakes. If there were a major breach, not only would homes, farms and infrastructure be destroyed, the water could be tainted by pesticides and minerals.

Because the situation had become so serious, the state and federal government entered into a cooperative effort in 1995, called the CALFED Bay-Delta Program. Since then, technical experts from state and federal agencies, along with a federally chartered public advisory committee representing the system's diverse interests, have established the foundation for a Bay-Delta solution. This foundation calls for all Bay-Delta interests — environmental, urban, agricultural and fisheries — to develop an equitable, durable and affordable consensus solution that reduces conflicts in the system. The CALFED program principles also prohibit a solution that would better one part of the problem by worsening another.

Public input throughout the program has come in various forms: the public advisory group, public meetings, workshops, thousands of mailings and a Website have all been utilized to gauge public concern. However,

the real need for public input is about to begin.

On March 16, CALFED released a draft environmental impact document identifying three potential Bay-Delta solutions. Each contains major programs aimed at water-use efficiency, ecosystem restoration, watershed management, levee system integrity, water transfers and water quality. The alternatives differ primarily in how they would move and store water in the system. The costs of the alternatives range from \$9 billion to \$10.5 billion and all of the alternatives propose more water storage.

Finding the best solution will not be an easy task, but it is an important one. At stake is the environmental quality of California, its agriculture, its salmon fishery, the nature of future development and the population the state will plan for. If you care about water quality and the environment, if you engage in outdoor recreation and fishing, if you enjoy our locally produced fruits, vegetables and king salmon, then you depend on the Bay-Delta. You have a historic opportunity to get involved. Don't let it pass you by.

Public hearings on the Delta plans have been scheduled over the course of the next month in numerous statewide locations, including May 18 in San Jose and May 28 in Santa Rosa. The hearings begin at 7 p.m. with informal question-and-answer sessions preceding the hearings at 6 p.m. Call (800) 900-3587 for meeting locations or more information.

Half Moon Bay resident Pietro Parravano is president of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations and a member of the Bay-Delta Advisory Council.